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David Park

**STAEMPFLI GALLERY
NEW YORK, NEW YORK**

DECEMBER 5-30, 1961

**INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS**

JANUARY 10-FEBRUARY 11, 1962

**TENNESSEE FINE ARTS CENTER
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE**

FEBRUARY 25-MARCH 31, 1962

✓ **CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART
WASHINGTON, D.C.**

APRIL 19-MAY 13, 1962

**OAKLAND ART MUSEUM
OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA**

MAY 26-JUNE 17, 1962

**UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA GALLERY
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA**

SEPTEMBER 24-OCTOBER 25, 1962

**KRANNERT ART MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY
OF ILLINOIS, URBANA, ILLINOIS**

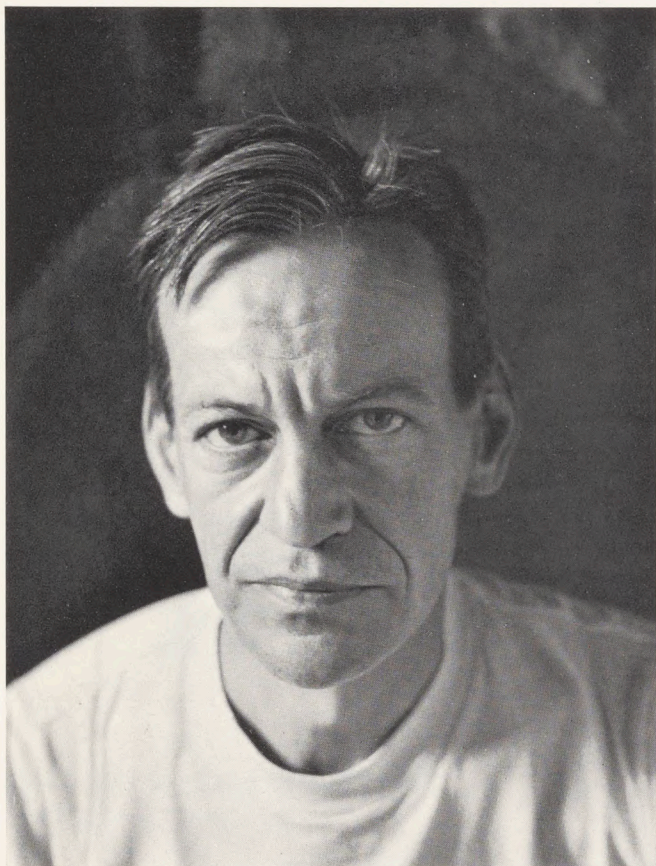
NOVEMBER 11-DECEMBER 2, 1962

DAVID PARK

1911-1960

RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION

EXHIBITION ORGANIZED BY STAEMPFLI GALLERY, NEW YORK



INTRODUCTION

Like ancient Athenian gods and medieval kings, artists are apt to be known by epithets. These may not be quite as pointed as Athena's being "grey-eyed" or Richard's being "lion-hearted". Nevertheless, defining phrases are apt to settle around many artists' names, in obedience to some atavistic urge which is, perhaps, a recognition of the powers and individualities behind these names. Eugene Boudin, for example, is unfailingly called "a link between the Barbizon School and impressionism". Jackson Pollock is a "prime mover of action painting". No reference to Mark Tobey fails to mention his "white writing" and his relation to the Orient. And so on. They stand, transfixed, in the halls of art history—and in the biographical dictionaries—holding their phrases like

Christian saints their attributes or knights their coats of arms.

David Park now has a reasonably secure option on a niche in American art annals, and, along with it, he has his epithet; he is "the first California new figurative painter". Those of us here who knew him feel mildly pleased, on the whole, that his memory now has this status symbol, and that he himself had a taste of whatever pleasures success gives before he died last year. However, now that his epithet has provided a beginning for the understanding of his work, it is time to expand into a broader, more penetrating appreciation of his art. The current retrospective exhibition, which the Staempfli Gallery has organized, is a fit occasion for this to commence.

Park's epithet implies that he was the first non-objective artist here to feel that the great international divide in the watershed of abstraction had been reached, and who started over the top and down the other side in a return to some kind of representation which is symptomatic of the beginning of an American "post-abstract" period. This isn't without a certain truth, but there is more to it than that. It takes only a few facts to confuse this over-simplification. To begin with, Park always was, except for a few years, basically a figurative painter, and he did not regard his non-objective work as a success. In fact, he finally took all he could lay his hands on to the Berkeley city dump. And yet, Park never at any time claimed that his figurative work was or should be the beginning of a separate movement. To him, it was always basically in the abstract expressionist stream; the figurative aspect was just a personal device which made it easier for him to paint. As he said of his work in 1953, "all of them are representations of definite subjects and otherwise probably not so very different from my former work". Further, in the later new figurative things, he achieved many of the very objectives of abstract expressionism



47. Bather and Ocean, 1958. Color reproduction courtesy of Indian Head Mills, Inc., New York.

which had eluded him in his non-objective paintings. His career as an artist is not the story of a switch from abstract to figurative; it is a complicated, fluctuating interplay of the two elements, both of which were always simultaneously present.

Then there is the question of Park's relation to an emerging new figurative art elsewhere in this country and abroad. If David Park—and his friends Elmer Bischoff and Richard Diebenkorn and the other Bay Area figurative painters—have been moving over some great divide into a new post-abstract territory, they seem to have ended up in quite a different place than that depicted in most of the "New Images of Man" exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in 1959. Peter Selz, who organized this important exhibition, held that its artists "... courageously aware of a time of dread, have found articulate expression for the 'wounds of existence'" in "images... often frightening in their anguish". Nothing could be further from the world which Park and the other new figurative painters of the Bay Area depict. While no Elysium, it is full of enduring humanity, of actuality, at worst of a serene melancholy.

To know Park's work, we must know something of the whole sweep of his life. Park's early work—from, say, 1930 up through 1945 was, in one way or another, based on an empathetic reaction to the human form as the most interesting object a painter could paint. Although he painted a few murals of workers in the Depression for the Federal Arts Project, he was not even mildly interested in social comment; he was interested in linear contours and shapes, and he responded most to those in the human form. During the late thirties and early forties, Park's work became increasingly abstract, influenced by the example of the Picasso figure paintings of the mid-twenties. Miro's work of the thirties and Piero della Francesca were other enthusiasms.

Park has always been closely associated with the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute), which had gradually edged into advanced abstractions and some non-objective work by the end of the war. The impact of returning veterans doubled the voltage of the place. Most of the painters then teaching there, including Park, participated fully in the excitement of the new abstract expressionist direction. Clyfford Still, brought there by director Douglas MacAgy, created a special but highly charged vision. Others with less of the myth about them, such as Park and Hassel Smith, were perhaps more in the center of the direction of the school as a whole. Park spent possibly four years painting in the general abstract expressionist vein. He continued his interest in linear contours, in positive and negative shapes; in addition, as Richard Diebenkorn says, "he learned something about how far he could go with paint".

However, Park finally decided that using his own imagination as a source of form made him too self-conscious; that he could never achieve the kind of absorption and immersion in a painting that he wanted. "As you grow older", Park once told me, "it dawns on you that you are yourself—that your job is not to force yourself into a style, but to do what you want. I saw that if I would accept subjects, I could paint with more absorption, with a certain enthusiasm for the subject which would allow some of the aesthetic qualities such as color and composition to evolve more naturally. With subjects, the difference is that I feel a natural development of the painting rather than a formal, self-conscious one. As a person, I have nothing in common with someone like Mondrian—he was an inventor, I am not; I love things, and my forms come more easily out of a less deliberate kind of invention."

Park also reacted against the growing pretentiousness of much of abstract expressionism and the



43. Man in a T-Shirt, 1958.

personalities of people like Clyfford Still. "David was keen about abstract expressionism", says Elmer Bischoff, "as long as it had that immediacy and tangibility and goopy, sensuous arrangements of forms. But when it got into very serious 'cosmological' ideas he didn't go along with that. He had a violent reaction..." to Still's posture and attitude as an artist. He felt that the austere, big paintings, in spite of their religious trappings, really ran the danger of being "just big decorations".

In 1950, Park quietly began trying his own personal balance of realistic and abstract elements. This first appeared publicly in "Kids on Bikes" at the San Francisco Art Association annual in 1951. The stalwart felt, as a later critic put it, this was only a "failure of nerve in the heroic age of American abstraction". More bluntly, Bischoff says many of the artists at the school felt he "chickened out". The jury, at least, acted perceptively and gave it a major award.

Park arrived at his new figurative style with remarkable directness; there are no signs of a transitional stage from the non-objective. In this new figurative style, he deliberately sought the bite of realism; he wanted forms which looked as if they came from "life", not "art". He painted beaches and boating scenes; he painted women at household tasks; he painted portraits; he painted the Dixieland band he played in for amusement, and the dancers it played for; he painted caricatures of cocktail parties and over-dressed, middle-aged women. His subjects have an easy satisfaction and contentment about them. Even the caricatures are more witty than cruel. Like Hassel Smith, Park had a great sense of the ridiculous, and could not resist the vulnerabilities of some of his subjects anymore than he could condone the stiffening arrogance of Still.

In these first figurative things, several traits come to light. Park was a great observer. Though his

paintings look as though they were sketched from life, they almost never were. He could digest the forms of a face, a chair, a car without so much as disturbing the flow of conversation and use them in a painting a week or so later. Incredibly enough, even though Park had not done portraits before, the portraits he did, mostly of his friends, were all done from memory, without their knowledge. Mixed in with scenes based on his wife reading a book the night before, or the previous weekend's expedition to the beach with the Mark Schorer family, were scenes of his boyhood in Boston and his summers in New England woods and ponds. It would seem he felt that what was essential about life was very much the same today and forty years ago. A practiced eye can detect, for example, New England in his boating scenes and California in the beach scenes, but his true subject was the forms of people in action. Many of the subjects he painted, whether based on observation or not, were the same subjects which had interested him in his pre-abstract years and which he now re-explored with greater success.

The first years of the new figurative work were done for the most part on a "fellowship" given by his good wife Lydia, who worked in order that he could, for once, paint full-time. This figurative work was markedly iconoclastic. The harder the realism bit, the better. He deliberately forced extreme contrasts of every sort into his work. He pulled both ends of everything farther out and left the middle blank. He shoved great chinks of people into the foreground, and tiny figures into the background; he regularly split canvases in two, with totally unlike elements on each side; he played far against near, big against little, bright against dark, busy against plain.

Gradually, in the middle fifties, his work began to evolve further. The eccentricities of composition relaxed into a simple naturalness. The bite of realism gave way to increasing interest in the



55. Daphne, 1959.

nude, in figures symbolic of humanity itself rather than of certain persons in particular. His stylized patterns became increasingly richer in paint, freer in outline and more fluent in color. His flat forms gave way to corporeal volumes immersed in light and shadow.

His outer life had changed by the mid-fifties also. He now had the companionship and stimulation of two painters equally interested in figurative painting: Elmer Bischoff from 1952 on, Richard Diebenkorn from 1955. He received an appointment to the faculty of the University of California in 1955. His work received more recognition in the local museums and began to be seen nationally. In 1956 the Richmond, California Art Center gave him a large one-man show and Walter P. Chrysler, Jr., bought a group of his paintings. In 1957 the Oakland Art Museum presented its exhibition surveying for the first time "Contemporary Bay Area Figurative Painting" and in 1958 a one-man show. Soon, whether he wanted it or not, there was a "movement"; there are now perhaps a dozen painters in the Bay Area doing significant new figurative work, and others—fortunately not many—who do these the flattery of imitation. In 1959 the Staempfli Gallery presented a show of his work as its inaugural exhibition.

Throughout the period from the mid-fifties into 1959, whatever was programmatic and consciously contrived in his work became increasingly spontaneous and natural, became richer in paint and more universal in its human implications. He was at the peak of his expressive ability when a persistent back trouble turned out to be a fatal cancer. It is not given to every artist to have one of those special final periods of accomplishment. Sometimes death is sudden and unexpected; sometimes the spirit has declined before the flesh begins to fail. Not every artist has the courage to pursue his art against the ultimate odds. However tragic Park's early and disquieting death has

been, there is at least the satisfaction that the momentum of his work was not only sustained but, in a way, increased.

In his last months he was unable to paint in oil on the large canvases to which he was accustomed. He turned to paper, first with ink sticks and then with gouache. He had consistently used pen and wash for life drawings in black and white, and he had developed as much fluency with that medium as he had with oil, although until then he had never worked in color with it and he had never used it for his finished paintings. In these weeks, Park roamed back through the memories of his life, through the various subjects and ideas which had interested him as an artist in earlier years. He found he was able to play upon his entire life as his subject. One thirty-foot scroll, done in ink sticks on a roll of shelf paper, summarizes its elements in their entirety. The gouaches are generally of the nude, or of bold heads and faces. These great last figures have a hieratic immensity, a great body warmth, a comprehending sobriety. As Diebenkorn says, "He knew the chips were down and he held nothing back".

To wrest this new and nobler image of man from the struggle with the actuality of death is to create the true dialogue between humanity and mortality; this is his monument.

Paul Mills
Director, Oakland Art Museum

CATALOGUE

- 62* 1. Boston Backyard, 1930. Oil on panel, 13" x 16 1/2".
2. Three Figures playing Violins, 1933. Oil on panel, 27" x 20".
3. Boston Common, 1935. Tempera on canvas, 29 1/4" x 25".
4. The Island, 1935. Tempera on canvas, 27" x 31".
5. Three Violinists and Dancers, 1935-37. Tempera on canvas, 27" x 34".
6. Dancing Couples, 1935-37. Tempera on canvas, 31" x 27".
7. Four People drinking Toast, 1935-37. Tempera on panel, 26" x 24".
8. Three Boys in Dunes, 1937. Tempera on canvas, 30" x 42".
- * 9. Flutist, 1938-39. Oil on canvas, 34" x 27".
- *10. Composition with two Figures in a Swing, 1938-39. Oil on canvas, 40" x 41 1/2".
11. Two Violinists, 1938-39. Oil on canvas, 30" x 50 1/4".
12. Two Violinists, 1938-39. Oil on canvas, 35 1/2" x 38".
- *13. Woman in red and white Robe, 1938-39. Oil on canvas, 52" x 24".
- *14. Woman, 1938-39. Oil on canvas, 42" x 36".
15. Girl reading, 1938-39. Oil on canvas, 30" x 24".
16. Man with Pickaxe, 1938-39. Oil on canvas, 42" x 30".
- *17. Still Life, 1949. Oil on canvas, 34" x 25".
- *18. Table with Fruit, 1950. Oil on canvas, 46" x 35 3/4".
19. Kids on Bikes, 1950. Oil on canvas, 48" x 42". Collection Mr. and Mrs. David Lloyd Kreeger, Washington, D.C.
20. Sun Bather, 1950-53. Oil on canvas, 36" x 46".
- *21. Rehearsal, 1951. Oil on canvas, 46" x 35 3/4".
- *22. Portrait of Hassel Smith, 1951. Oil on canvas, 34" x 28".
- *23. Woman with black Glove, 1951. Oil on canvas, 26" x 24".
24. Cousin Emily and Pet-Pet, 1952. Oil on canvas, 46" x 33 1/2".
- 62*25. Bus Stop, 1952. Oil on canvas, 36" x 34".
- 63*26. Shore Line, 1952. Oil on canvas, 31 3/4" x 38".
- *27. White Fence, 1953. Oil on canvas, 8 1/2" x 10 1/4".
28. The Bus, 1954. Oil on canvas, 48" x 43 1/2".
29. The Dance, 1954. Oil on canvas, 35 3/4" x 52".
- *30. Red Hat, 1954-55. Oil on canvas, 34" x 20".
- *31. Mother-in-Law, 1954-55. Oil on canvas, 26" x 19 1/2". Collection Mr. and Mrs. Wilfred P. Cohen, Great Neck, L.I., New York.
32. Portrait of Richard Diebenkorn, 1955. Oil on canvas, 20" x 14 1/4".
- *33. City Street, 1955. Oil on canvas, 59" x 45 1/2".
- *34. Standing Nude, 1956. Oil on canvas, 25" x 16".

35. Campus, 1956. Oil on canvas, 51 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 46".
36. Riverbank, 1956. Oil on canvas, 58 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 67 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". Collection Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence H. Bloedel, Williamstown, Massachusetts.
37. Two female Figures, 1957. Oil on canvas, 60" x 50".
38. Bather with Knee up, 1957. Oil on canvas, 56" x 50".
- 63* 39. Interior, 1957. Oil on canvas, 54" x 48".
- 64 40. Two Figures, 1957. Oil on canvas, 36" x 29".
- 63 41. Canoe, 1957. Oil on canvas, 36" x 48".
- 64 42. Standing Couple, 1958. Oil on canvas, 75" x 57". Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, Urbana.
- * 43. Man in a T-Shirt, 1958. Oil on canvas, 60" x 50".
44. Rowboat, 1958. Oil on canvas, 57" x 61". Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. Provisional Collection through Mr. and Mrs. Stanley X. Housen.
- * 45. Four Men, 1958. Oil on canvas, 57" x 92". Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
46. Bathers, 1958. Oil on canvas, 58" x 50". Collection Mr. and Mrs. William Zeckendorf, Jr., New York
- * 47. Bather and Ocean, 1958. Oil on canvas, 36" x 30". Collection Indian Head Mills, Inc., New York.
48. Green Canoe, 1958. Oil on canvas, 50" x 56". Collection Mr. and Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger, New York.
49. Small Bather, 1958. Oil on canvas, 22" x 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ ". Collection Mr. and Mrs. Phillip A. Bruno, New York.
- * 50. Couple, 1959. Oil on canvas, 26" x 48". Collection of Morgan Flagg Family, San Luis Obispo, California.
- * 51. Boy-Girl, 1959. Oil on canvas, 50" x 58".
52. Head, 1959. Oil on canvas, 16" x 14".
- * 53. Woman with Towel, 1959. Oil on canvas, 38" x 27 $\frac{1}{2}$ ".
- * 54. Nudes and Ocean, 1959. Oil on canvas, 60" x 50".
55. Daphne, 1959. Oil on canvas, 75" x 57".
56. Head, 1959. Oil on canvas, 32" x 26". Collection Mrs. Alexander D. Knox, New York.
57. Ethiopia, 1959. Oil on canvas, 52" x 60". Collection Mr. and Mrs. George W. Staempfli, New York.
- * 58. Male Nude, 1960. India ink on paper, 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 8 $\frac{5}{8}$ ".
- * 59. Back of Nude, 1960. India ink on paper, 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 8 $\frac{5}{8}$ ".
- * 60. Standing Nude, 1960. India ink on paper, 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 8 $\frac{5}{8}$ ".
- * 61. Male Nude, 1960. India ink on paper, 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 8 $\frac{5}{8}$ ".
- * ~~62. Red Figure, 1960. Gouache on paper, 15" x 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ ".~~
- * ~~63. Woman arranging her Ear-ring, 1960. Gouache on paper, 13" x 12".~~
- * ~~64. Standing Nudes, 1960. Gouache on paper, 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 11 $\frac{1}{4}$ ".~~
- * ~~65. Players, 1960. Gouache on paper, 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 14".~~

Landscape
Head
Nude and Still Life
Standing Nudes

* Because of space limitations, only the paintings marked * will be exhibited at Staempfli Gallery.

CHRONOLOGY

David Park was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1911. He became interested in painting in early childhood, which fact is partly responsible for his having been a conspicuously poor student although receiving the privileges of an excellent, New England, private school education. He came to California—Los Angeles—in 1928 and studied for a year at the Otis Art Institute. In 1929 he migrated to San Francisco, had a job cutting stone for Ralph Stackpole on his Stock Exchange commission, married in 1930, and since then has made the Bay Area his home. From 1931 to 1936 he taught in several East Bay private schools and gave courses at the University of California Extension Division. At the same time he was active on the W. P. A. Art Project. From 1936 to 1941 he taught in Boston, at the Winsor School. He had reestablished himself in the Bay Area in 1941, before the outbreak of the war, and during the war years he worked the graveyard shift in a factory in Emeryville. He taught at the California School of Fine Arts from 1943 to 1952. From 1953 to 1955, with his children grown up and married, he devoted full time to painting, on what he gratefully refers to as a Lydia Park fellowship, and since 1955 has been on the faculty of the University of California Art Department. The preceding paragraph was written by David Park for the catalogue of his one-man exhibition in 1959 at the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum. He died on September 20, 1960, in Berkeley, California.

ONE-MAN EXHIBITIONS

- 1935 San Francisco Museum of Art
- 1936 Delphic Studios, New York
- 1939 New Gallery, Boston
- 1940 San Francisco Museum of Art
- 1946 California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco
- 1954 Paul Kantor Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1955 Richmond Art Center, Richmond, California

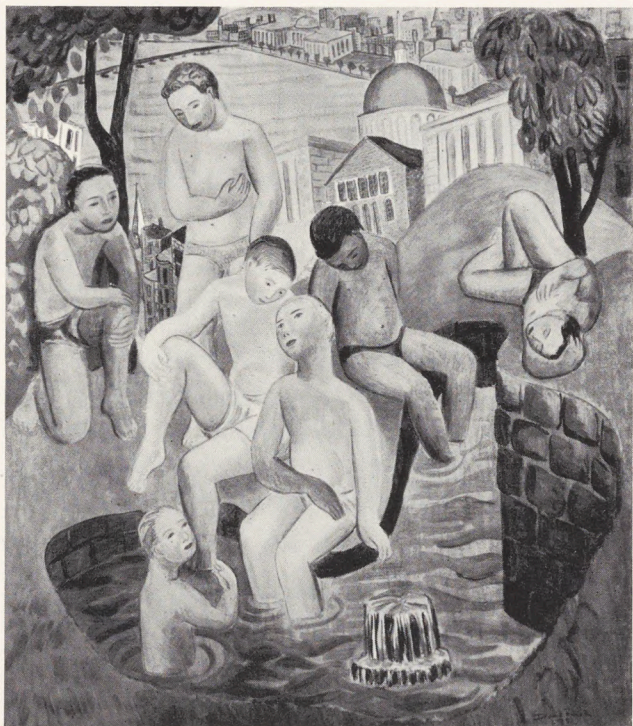
- 1956 College of Architecture, University of California
- 1957 Oakland Art Museum, Oakland, California
- 1959 M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco
Staempfli Gallery, New York
- 1960–61 Memorial exhibition, "Elmer Bischoff, Richard Diebenkorn, David Park", Staempfli Gallery, New York
Exhibition of watercolors and drawings at Oakland Art Museum; Art Center in La Jolla, California; Artists Cooperative Gallery, Sacramento, California

MAJOR GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- University of Illinois Biennial, 1952, 1957, 1959, 1961
- III Biennial of São Paulo, 1955
- Art: USA, 1958 and 1959
- Whitney Museum Annual, 1959
- Indiana University, "New Imagery in American Painting", 1959
- Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts Annual, 1960 (received the Walter Lippincott Prize)
- "The Figure in Contemporary American Painting", American Federation of Arts
- The Art Institute of Chicago, 64th American Exhibition
- The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 27th Biennial
- "The American Vanguard", United States Information Agency

David Park is represented in the collections of the following museums:

- Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston
- Oakland Art Museum
- San Francisco Museum of Art
- Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



3. Boston Common, 1935.

8. Three Boys in Dunes, 1937.





11. Two Violinists, 1938–39.



10. Composition with two Figures in a Swing, 1938-39.

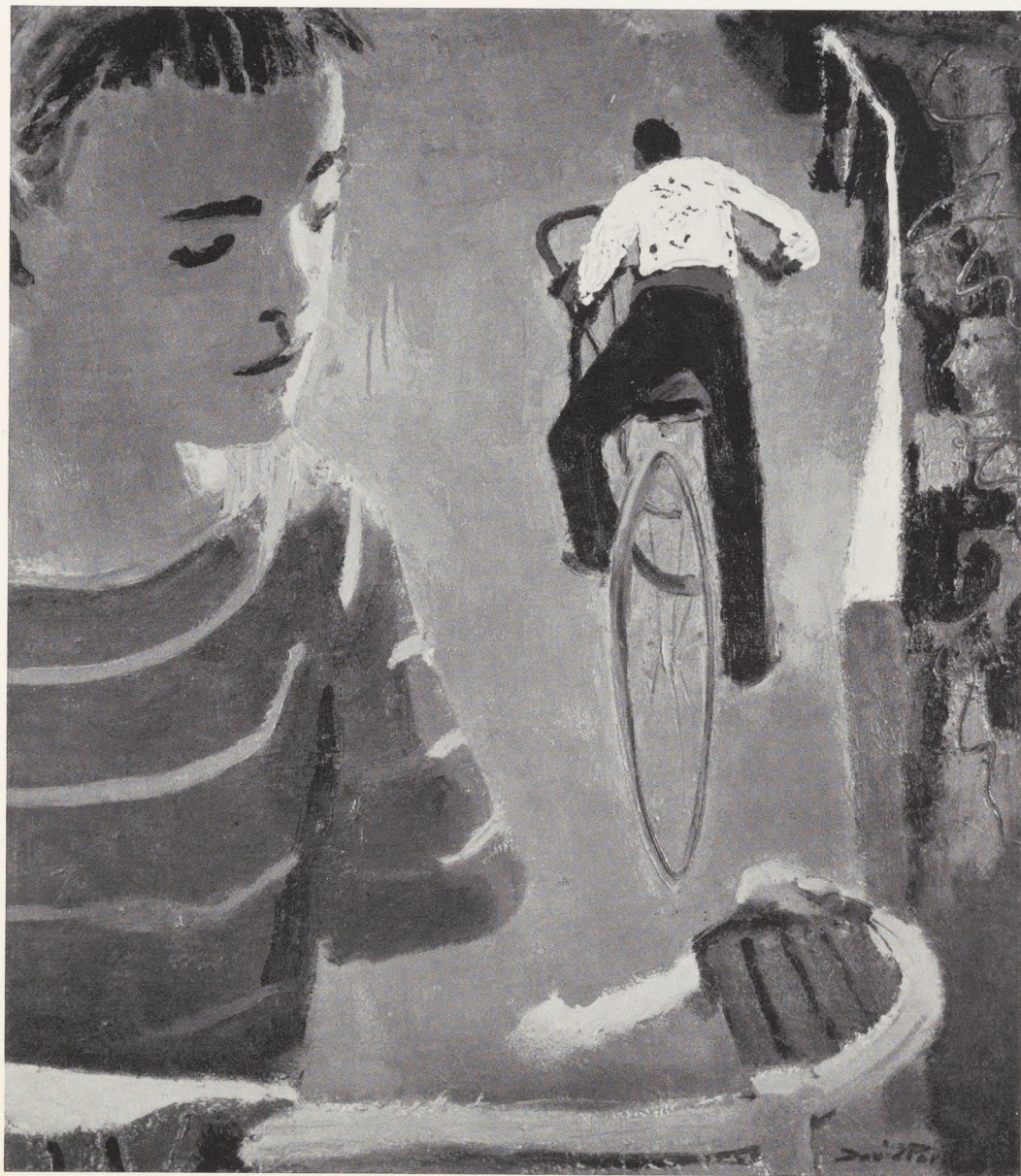
14. Woman, 1938-39.

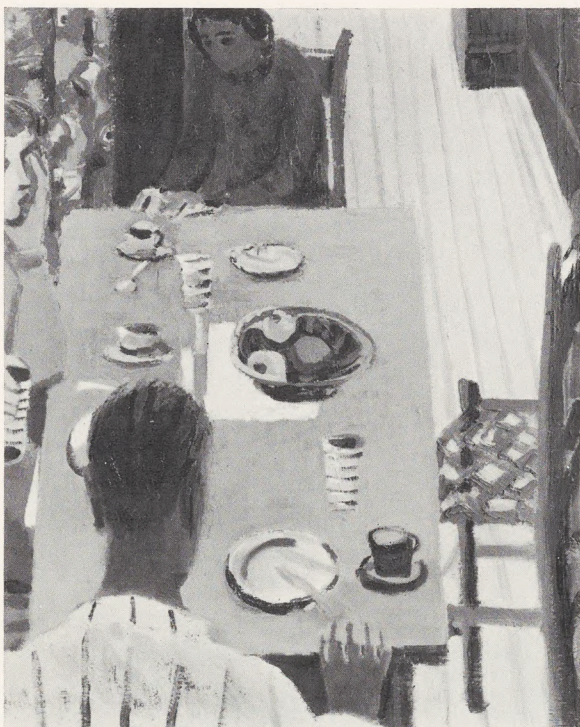


17. Still Life, 1949.



19. Kids on Bikes, 1950.



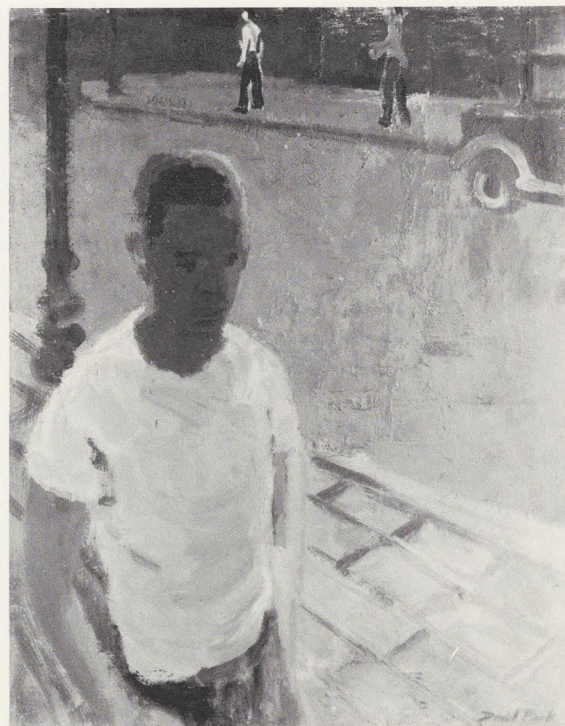


18. Table with Fruit, 1950.

21. Rehearsal, 1951.



25. Bus Stop, 1952.



33. City Street, 1955.



30. Red Hat, 1954–55.



31. Mother-in-Law, 1954–55.

39. Interior, 1957.





36. Riverbank, 1956.

44. Rowboat, 1958.





45. Four Men, 1958.



46. Bathers, 1958.



48. Green Canoe, 1958.



50. Couple, 1959.

56. Head, 1959.



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